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WORLD CHRONICLE

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DESERTIFICATION

Franklin Cardy, Director, Desertification Control and Deputy Assistant Executive Director for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), highlights the destructive impact desertification inflicts on arable land and communities. More than 3 billion hectares and 900 million people are affected by this natural problem worldwide. Mr. Cardy warns of economic and social consequences if desertification continues unabated.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is WORLD CHRONICLE, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's WORLD CHRONICLE.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is WORLD CHRONICLE.

Over the last few decades, a worldwide phenomenon is spreading at an accelerating pace in more than 100 countries on all continents: desertification. It robs millions of hectares of fertile land of their production capacity to feed an increasingly hungry world. It affects about one-sixth of the world's population, 70 per cent of all drylands, and one quarter of the earth's total land area.

What should the world community do to combat the growing threat of this natural disaster? Our guest today has a special interest in the problem of desertification. He is Franklin Cardy, Director, Desertification Control and Deputy Assistant Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, or UNEP.

A national of Canada, Mr. Cardy will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Obi Emekekwue of the News Agency of Nigeria, Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand, and Appen Menon of Inter Press Service.

Before we talk to Mr. Cardy, let's look at one country's efforts in fighting desertification. Our correspondent Steve Whitehouse reports.

NARRATION:

Once a year, the Paris-Dakhar motor rally comes to northern Mali, but after a day of excitement, life on the southern edge of the Sahara reverts to normal. Since the late sixties, much of west Africa has been plagued by drought. The desert is moving inexorably southwards, threatening to bury everything in its path.

But the capital of Mali, Bamako, stands astride an immense natural resource: it's the Niger River, and it's one of the keys to fighting back the desert. Answers are desperately needed. This is the floor of Lake Fagubine. Until recently, it was one of the biggest lakes in West Africa.

As fishing and farming collapsed, 60 thousand people left the area. Those who remained were mainly women and children -- and the elderly.

But one man had a visionary scheme to bring the waters of the Niger flowing back into these dried up-lakes. He's Malian aid worker Drissa Coulibaly, who planned to literally dig the area out of its crisis.

He explained how between the River Niger and the dried-up lakes of Tele and Fagubine there's a nine meter drop in height. To get Niger water to flow into Lake Fagubine, the trick is to connect them with a channel. Once the water reaches Lake Tele, it will easily flow into Lake Fagubine.

Organized through the United Nations Sudano Sahelian Office, the project gets under way. Coulibaly's army of labourers toil under a blazing sky. Over nine months, they shift millions of cubic meters of sand with nothing more than hand tools.

Then, Drissa Coulibaly is able to make a dramatic announcement.

COULIBALY (TRANSLATION):
The waters arrived here a whole month early. So the impossible can be achieved: we can bring the waters back to Lake Fagubine.

NARRATION:
With the coming of the Niger waters, life begins to stir again. As the news gets out, villagers and their herds are quick to return. But not for everyone. In this village, people are still struggling. The channel's water stopped short of their fields. Maybe next year, with more digging, they'll be lucky. It's a fight against a worldwide problem -- the spread of deserts.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Cardy, although we've just heard a good deal about the spread of deserts, in a briefing document that you prepared that I have in front of me I notice that you refer to the "largely invalid concept of expanding deserts and advancing sand dunes". You go on to say this has become a more permanent image in the public eye than the less visible and much more serious phenomenon of land degradation in drylands, which you address in the briefing paper. Perhaps you'd like to amplify a little bit.

CARDY: Yes, indeed. The problem with deserts is that when you get into a dry period, a dryer-than-usual period, they tend to expand. But when the rains come back, they will likely contract again. And particularly in Africa, during the 60s, 70s and 80s,

there was an extended period of dryer-than-usual weather. The result of that was that the deserts did in some areas, quote, "expand". The Sahara tended to move temporarily southwards. But since the mid-80s, for instance, by and large -- and it's difficult to generalize on this, because every area is different; we all know how the weather changes from one place to another -- but basically the last five years have been relatively wet, and so --

LITTLEJOHNS: So the desert has retreated?

CARDY: The problem -- well, it's gone -- it's in its usual place. It breathes a bit like we do, it expands and contracts, depending on the rain that feeds it. And so that is one element of this. The problem with the term "desertification" is that it includes drought and drought effects, it includes probably long-term climate effects over centuries, if there are such, and it also includes land degradation which is caused by actual activities, human activities or animal activities.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is that the main problem, what's being done by human beings, rather than the forces of nature?

CARDY: Well, they're all problems, but the ones that we have most chance of doing something about are the ones that we are responsible for. Doing something about drought is difficult, if not impossible, because drought is a naturally recurring cyclical pattern.

LITTLEJOHNS: Rainmakers are not very effective?

CARDY: Rainmaking has been tried in the Sahel, for instance, without a great deal of success. Both the traditional and the technical, high-tech approaches have been tried, and, well, I can't speak for the traditional, but the high-tech certainly has not been a great success. No. It's a question of trying to focus or what we're talking about. Unfortunately, these three elements are really included in the term "desertification", which is why there has -- and it's also much easier to understand, to imagine a concept of desert, sand dunes, expanding and marching. They do in some places: Mauritania, for instance, there are sand dunes on the edge of Nouakchott, the capital. And these are a real problem in some places. But the worldwide problem of the global issue is not so much the normal expansion and contraction of deserts, but man's impact. And, in fact, this can be made even worse by wet periods, not just by the dry periods, because during the wet periods --

LITTLEJOHNS: Washes away the topsoil?

CARDY: Well, yes. But also people become confident that the rains are here, we can move into the drier areas. The nomads, or the pastoralists, tend to move further into what is normally desert areas, and behind them come the rain-fed agricultural croppers who plough up the grassland, if they get a chance. And then of course after a year or two, or five years, we go back to a normal weather pattern, the rain is less, and the pastoralists come back down and the grassland is gone, and the rain-fed crop people can't grow their crops because there isn't enough rain for it, and so you have an unavoidable -- given our needs, it's not exactly a fault situation, it's a problem of how do we get the best resources from the land.

EMEKEKWUE: Mr. Cardy, can you give us a sense of the scope of the problem worldwide? How bad is the problem really at this time?

CARDY: I'd be delighted to. Of course, that's a judgemental question. A lot of attention has been focused on saying how many hectares -- and it's something like over 3 billion hectares -- are affected by desertification, and of these some varying percentages are affected, to 20 per cent, 50 per cent, and you can get into a lot of technical figures here.

There's another way of looking at this and saying, well, really, this is a social problem. The reason this is a problem is because it's affecting us, people who live and try and make a subsistence existence on the drylands of the world. And according to the best estimates that we can make, there are up to 900 million people that are at risk from the effects. Now, I'm not saying that these people are starving, and I'm not saying that they all have degraded land, but we're saying that in the rural areas, in the drylands, in countries all -- well, most of the countries of the world, we have up to 900 million people who one can say if they're not affected now, they are indirectly affected and are at risk.

Now, to come down to more immediate impacts, we can look at the current estimates that are going around of up to 40 million people suffering from malnutrition in Africa alone. And there are other estimates of maybe 2 million who are on the edge of starvation in Africa. These are the symptoms of this disease. How bad is it? We feel if there are up to 900 million people at risk from the effects of this, and if there are 40 million people maybe suffering from direct impacts in Africa alone, then this is a major significant issue which has not really received the attention that it deserves.

LESSING: Well, Mr. Cardy, what are you going to do about it, or what are you trying to do about it?

CARDY: Well, let me start just a little bit in the past. There was an international conference in Nairobi in 1977 on desertification which prepared a United Nations Plan of Action to Combat Desertification. And since then the approach has basically been to try and get a better handle on assessment of desertification -- and this is particularly on the physical characteristics, where it is and how much, and so forth -- and to prepare national plans of action in many countries. And then, their hope has been that these will be implemented. And it is fair to say that in many cases the implementation has fallen more short of what everybody who's involved would hope for.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is that for want of money?

CARDY: Yes. And also perhaps commitment more through the --

LITTLEJOHNS: Political commitment.

CARDY: -- process.

LITTLEJOHNS: Political commitment.

CARDY: Political commitment to really get to grips with this intractable problem. Also for other reasons, for the problem of the perception of the issue: some technical people will say, well, desertification doesn't exist, what you're really talking about is land degradation. Others will -- it's interesting. Desertification means something to the public, and yet it hasn't caught the imagination of the public, except in so far as advancing sand dunes. To the technical people, they argue about, you know, "What is this? And really you're talking..." -- and they try and define it more narrowly. And we have not resolved all these problems yet.

MENON: Yes, just to follow up, Mr. Cardy, why do you think the convention you're discussing at the moment will not suffer the same fate as the UN Plan of Action of 1977?

CARDY: Well, the convention is an opportunity to lead on from exactly what I was just saying, to try and bring the political attention to bear on this issue. And this convention was encouraged or generated, one might also say, particularly by African countries at UNCED. And I think there is a real hope that, if you like, the politicization of this issue finally will get it onto the global political agenda.

That being said, there are a number of major challenges that the negotiation of this convention will involve. And I can perhaps sum it up by saying that there's a catch phrase which has now been going around for two or three years, or more than that, about "think globally, act locally". And this desertification problem is a case beyond all others, which has to be thought about globally, but the action is going to have to be right at the field level. It is often the woman standing in a field in Africa who has to feed her family today. And the question is, can she be given the support so that she can do it in a more sustainable manner? And not only the ladies, but the men as well. But there are a majority of women, for instance, in Africa who are farmers. And that is the crux of this question: how can we find ways to give her the support or him the support that he actually needs? Let's say a unique challenge. And this means at the local level.

It's very difficult for international conventions, international organizations, even national organizations, to really get to grips with a number of local implementation efforts.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is WORLD CHRONICLE, our guest is Franklin Cardy, Director, Desertification Control, and Deputy Assistant Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme.

EMEKEKWUE: Mr. Cardy, to go back to the convention, how does the convention plan to attack this problem? I mean, what are the main points that it addresses?

CARDY: Really, the convention is just starting. They have just had an organization meeting, which actually is still going on upstairs, and they have so far really been addressing how they will go about organizing it, the negotiating process. It is too early to say really how they're going to go about doing this. People have been beginning to think about drafts and how the convention might do this. But this is the purpose of the negotiating process, to figure this out.

I want to be a bit more useful. I think that they have a major challenge, because by June 1994 -- which is what, 17 months still? -- in 17 months they have to produce a negotiated convention. And this is a major challenge. This convention is unlike the others. I mean, climate change is a global -- to the extent that it's going to happen, it's likely to be a global issue with local changes, but basically it's a global issue, in a physical sense. The problem with this one, as I said, is that we think it's a global issue, but it needs so many different interceptions in different areas. I mean, what is going to be

required in the north of Nigeria may be significantly different from even in Burkina Faso, because there are changes in culture, in languages; there are so many languages involved, there are so many cultural perceptions, there are religious differences, there -- all these things affect the implementation of this issue.

LESSING: I'd like to move away from the convention, which clearly we're still moving towards, and think about, as you said in your background paper, that you've had many failures in the last 15 years, but you've learned from them, and you've also had some successes. Could you tell us about some of the successful things that have happened?

CARDY: Yes, indeed. We're talking about the whole international community, which has made significant and major efforts to try and address this issue over the years. The problem has often tended to be finding the right way to implement the wishes of the national agencies and the international agencies.

As to the successes, one of the reasons I brought this up here, and other people are bringing it up at the moment, is because we realize that there are successes and we haven't heard enough about them. It has been said that we've reached the point of donor fatigue on this issue, and it's partly because so many things have been tried, and they have not worked.

What we need to do now is to identify the successes, find out where they are, and better spread the word around. So that was to some extent a memo to ourselves. This is very much a role that UNEP can play. Without resources, we're not an implementing agency, but we can try and get hold of these and spread the word around about them. You asked me to do it right now.

Yes, there are successes in the areas that I've worked, I know about some. I worked in Burkina Faso, I worked in the Gambia and Cape Verde and [other] places, I've got some experience in Iran, and I've been in some of the eastern African countries. But in each country, each agency that's working in each country probably also has a success somewhere, but we're not -- clearly we're not --

LITTLEJOHNS: Each UN agency has --

CARDY: Oh, NGOs --

LITTLEJOHNS: Non-governmental organizations --

CARDY: National NGOs and international, yes.

LESSING: Is there any one particular thing that stands out, one project, one program that really has worked?

CARDY: I think that -- no, more than that, I think there is a complete, almost a complete consensus now, that we have to get back to the person in the field. That is providing support for the person who is at the forefront of the battle. They're the environmental managers. The farmers on the drylands of the world are the environmental managers. They're the people with a holistic approach -- we hear people talking about holistic approaches because we are set up sectorially. We all have our specialties and our agencies and our ministries, and this is another one of the problems that has to be dealt with, or considered, in approaching this programme.

If we can find ways to address the needs of the people who are faced with the problem every day.... A couple of years ago, people were saying to me, ah, but, you know, this environment business, this is a western concept. You know, Africans don't have the same perception of environment, pollution control and all this sort of thing. The best description I've heard of what environment management is about came to me from somebody in Burkina Faso who was not educated at all. But they are faced every day with managing the environment. They get up at maybe four o'clock in the morning, and maybe the dust is blowing, they have to find water, they have to mill the maize or whatever, millet, for the food for the day. This is where the environment management is at. What we're really talking about is improved environment management.

And if all these many people are affected, we also have a big opportunity, because there are all those many people out there who have themselves already an incentive to do things better, but what they lack sometimes is a very -- a variety of problems: sometimes it's land security, sometimes it's the security of knowing that if they plant a tree somebody else's goats won't eat it, or it may be a question of education, a question of health, their children; it may be a cultural question.

So, you know. I heard last night by chance somebody saying on the business programme if you have a consumer out there and you know what their needs are, you have a business. If you can meet their needs. Well, it's so obvious and so simple. We have millions of poor farmers working on difficult land, and if we can get closer to addressing their needs and start from that point, and then try and work back how can we

provide what they need, not necessarily what we think they need, then maybe we can make some progress.

MENON: Yes, but this poor farmer in the field is governed by land relations, tenure relations, and that, to change that would involve politics. That's why political parties are there. So eventually, would you have to intervene in a political fashion?

CARDY: Well, absolutely, this is a problem of -- this is why it's not just a technical problem, it's a political problem, and that is why we're delighted that there is now a convention being prepared, which is a political process. And this is one of the things that has been lacking in the past -- a political commitment. You're absolutely right, and it's not -- it's even beyond that, it covers a whole gamut. It's really a part of environment management, and that covers so many things. The global community is still beginning to learn how to get to grips with these complex inter-related issues, and yet the farmer in the field, he knows everything there is to know about his area. I mean, he has a feel for what needs to be done there in a broader sense than the agricultural extension officer, or the forester who comes next week and says plant trees, or whatever.

LITTLEJOHNS: In this briefing paper that I referred to earlier, Mr. Cardy, I notice that you say that the cost of drylands degradation is about $42 billion a year. How is that calculated? I mean, in what form is this loss taking place?

CARDY: Two questions. UNEP, in an attempt to prepare for UNCED, commissioned some work to look at -- to take the best estimates that were available on the extent of desertification, the extent of degradation if you like, the number of hectares, the degree of desertification; to look at all the economic figures that are available -- and they are limited, because economics is still learning how to grasp natural resources.

And they came up with the best estimates of what would be required to stop things getting worse, to make things a little bit better. And this was the figure that came out of that. Everybody throws scorn on it. Nobody has come up with anything else. And we would not pretend that this is accurate to within a few million. But it's an order of magnitude, it's an indication of the extent of this issue we're talking about. The message has just not got over. It's such a big amount.

Now, it's partly because the economics of land degradation have not been elaborated to the point where the costs of soil loss are factored into crop production, for instance. I mean, we're not talking third world here -- all the drylands -- we're talking

everywhere. We still haven't got the techniques for incorporating environmental factors, many environmental factors and natural resource management factors into the economics. We're working on it now, but . . . .

LITTLEJOHNS: You've spoken almost exclusively of the problems of Africa. What about other parts of the world?

CARDY: Absolutely.

LITTLEJOHNS: Including developed countries.

CARDY: Absolutely. Yes. The drylands of the world that we're talking about, and we're not talking about deserts, by the way, we're talking about, if you like, the desert margins. Those figures you were quoting refer to that. They go right through Asia, Australia, Africa, and in South America and some in North America. And we have -- about one-third of the problem is in Africa, about one-third in Asia, and the rest is spread amongst the others.

The second question I've lost.

LITTLEJOHNS: About the developed countries. I mean --

CARDY: Oh, yes. Well, this is the problem we're talking about, land degradation. Which we were all trying to do to focus the issue. Because then you have to say land degradation -- we're only talking land degradation in dry areas. What are dry areas? You have to then say semi-arid, arid, and sub-humid. And then people lose track. Land degradation also is a problem in the other areas, the more humid areas. But we're trying to focus, we've got a big enough problem at the moment with what we're trying to deal with here.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Cardy, that's all the time we have. You've talked about a very interesting subject that too few people know much about. Thank for you for joining us on this edition of WORLD CHRONICLE.

Our guest has been Franklin Cardy, Director of the Desertification Control and Deputy Assistant Executive Director for the United Nations Environment Programme. He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters by Obi Emekekwue of the News Agency of Nigeria, Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand, and Appen Menon of Inter Press Service. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of WORLD CHRONICLE.

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